



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 10
Issue 1 April 2006

Article 6

10-18-2016

Flight of the Phoenix

Bill Jenkins
Crichton College, jenkins@crichton.edu

Recommended Citation

Jenkins, Bill (2016) "Flight of the Phoenix," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol10/iss1/6>

This Film Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
Omaha

Flight of the Phoenix

Abstract

This is a review of *Flight of the Phoenix* (2004).

Though the temptation is strong to compare this version of *Flight of the Phoenix* with the original (1965) and then explain why the original is superior, the current version remains the focus here. The movie will entertain some viewers, no doubt, but a few significant flaws keep the story from working on more than a superficial level. Two of these flaws are a vaporous spirituality that appears now and then and a grating kind of nearly-adolescent masculinity that marks most of the characters.

The storyline is simple and compelling in its own way. A twin-engine cargo plane picks up a small oil crew at a failed rig deep in Mongolia. On their way back to civilization, a monster sand storm overwhelms the plane, causing it to crash off course in a huge stretch of desert within the China border. The radio has been smashed, the surrounding geology makes compasses spin crazily, and water is limited. The small group, tense with hateful animosities both before and after the crash, face inevitable death by thirst, until one of them, an airplane designer, comes up with a plan to salvage elements from the wrecked craft to build a jalopy of a plane. Even though it turns out that the designer actually works for a company that builds small remote controlled craft, the motley crew successfully flies out, barely escaping an unbelievably large group of desert bandits sweeping down upon them just as the rebuilt craft takes off.

Easily the best part of the movie comes early in the brief scene that shows the plane going down. Digital technology creates stunning images of the craft as the sandstorm engulfs it, causing it to crash.

Unfortunately, the rest of the film descends into a preachy, "I-know-we-can-do-it" narrative that is strangely reminiscent of the dozens of shows on cable T.V. on which people build robots, cars, or other machines out of junk. The belligerent masculine strutting of nearly all the characters (even the lone female, at times) reduces them mostly to stereotypes of muscled American tough guys who find it difficult to be nice to one another. Even the nerd of the group turns amazingly vicious with no qualms, shooting a villain even though nothing has prepared viewers for this side of his personality. By film's end, though, they all become as chummy as members of a boyscout troop or baseball team, slapping one another on the back and whooping loudly about their success.

Though the film industry has shown itself capable of turning out quality films dealing maturely with religion, like *The Third Miracle*, *The Mission*, and *On the Waterfront*, this movie shows religion in film at its worst. Two characters, the "chef," a young Hispanic man, and Rady, an older man of unidentified Middle Eastern extraction, both serve as people who hold to some kind of religious belief in an otherwise secular environment. The chef, a Catholic, crosses himself before he eats but his actions are shown to be merely unthinking habit. Rady, seen

fingering prayer beads and holding what looks like a small Koran, doles out vacuous wisdom, sounding more like Mr. Rogers than a Muslim. Neither character's religion impacts the other survivors in any way, even though Rady is portrayed as possessing the more authentic religion—not Islam, per se, but a vague sense that everything will be o.k. His joke about a rabbi and a priest at a boxing match reduces personal faith to mere good intentions, ironically undercutting the uniqueness of both Catholicism and Islam. In the end, the film supports the notion that neither religion is any truer or more helpful than the generic belief that people ought to have something to hope for.

Religious imagery dots the screen, such as the crosses at the graves. The sound track switches randomly from rock to Middle-Eastern sounding music to faux Tibetan drone. The religious vision proffered in *Flight of the Phoenix* nicely demonstrates an updated form of the bland civil religion that dominates American culture. For that reason alone the movie is potentially useful to those studying the intersections of religion and film.